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Substantive questions

Development of an international radio broadcasting capacity for the United Nations: progress report on the pilot project

Report by the Secretary-General

1. In resolution 54/82 B of 6 December 1999, the General Assembly requested "the Department of Public Information to start, as soon as possible, the implementation of the pilot project" relevant to the development of an international radio broadcasting capacity for the United Nations "through, *inter alia*, contacts with interested Member States and other specialized institutions, with a view to ensuring the assistance necessary for the success of the project, taking into account the need to enhance the existing resources and services". The General Assembly further requested the Secretary-General to submit a progress report on the implementation of the pilot project to the Committee on Information at its twenty-second session.

2. In resolution 54/250 A, part VII, of 23 December 1999, on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001, covering section 26, Public Information, the General Assembly outlined the budgetary elements necessary for the implementation of the project.

3. In his report to the Committee on Information (A/AC.198/1999/5), the Secretary-General stated that the purpose of the pilot project was to test the technical feasibility, programming capacity, resource requirements and listeners' interest in the development of an

international radio broadcasting capacity for the United Nations.

4. The present report provides details of the progress made to date with regard to the preparations for the implementation of the pilot project and the project's integral role in the process of modernization of United Nations Radio. It also provides a summary of the results of the survey questionnaires conducted to determine the readiness of radio networks and satellite distribution systems in different regions to provide airtime for the pilot project. Also included is a summary of the conclusions of an overall review of the current patterns of radio programme production and distribution, carried out by the Department of Public Information in preparation for the implementation of the radio pilot project.

I. Results of the questionnaire surveys of radio stations

5. Two questionnaire surveys were carried out in 1999 and early 2000 to determine the readiness of radio stations in different regions to participate in the pilot project and assess the capacity of stations to provide



airtime or satellite distribution for the daily news package.

6. The first questionnaire survey was managed by the Department of Public Information and covered the Caribbean region. The survey was conducted from May to July 1999 and achieved a very high response rate of 80 per cent, with 65 per cent of stations willing to provide airtime for the project. In total, 26 radio stations were contacted, and 17 expressed an interest in participation in the pilot project.

7. In December 1999, the Department of Public Information commissioned an independent consultant to manage the second survey, aimed at determining the readiness of radio stations in other regions — Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australasia, the Commonwealth of Independent States and Europe — to provide airtime or satellite distribution arrangements for the pilot project. A survey questionnaire was sent to 583 radio stations, chosen to represent radio broadcasters in Member States. This included 160 national broadcasters and a range of other public and commercial stations with a reasonable degree of speech, news and current affairs content.

8. The preliminary results of the second survey, which was launched in January and had a deadline of 22 February 2000, achieved an overall response rate of 26 per cent, which is on the low side. Responses varied by region, with the highest response rate from Africa (39 per cent) and the lowest from the United States of America and Canada (5 per cent). Response rates from other regions were: Europe (35 per cent), the Russian Federation/Commonwealth of Independent States (28 per cent), Central and South America (19 per cent), Middle East/North Africa (18 per cent), Indian subcontinent (13 per cent), East/South-East Asia/Far East and Australasia (13 per cent).

9. Some differences in methodology account for the variation in response rates for the two surveys, as follows:

(a) For the Caribbean survey, managed internally by the Department of Public Information, the sample of stations surveyed was much smaller and the time-scale more extensive than for the second survey. Also, a much smaller geographical area was covered, which meant that the initial distribution of the questionnaire and subsequent follow-up were simpler and easier to manage;

(b) Because of the tight deadline for submission of the questionnaire, the time-scale for completion of the second survey was more limited, affecting the time available for essential follow-up. The scale of the second survey was also much larger and, as a rule, response rates for large-scale surveys are commonly lower than those for small-scale surveys.

10. The consultant will continue to monitor and collate late responses to the survey and keep the Department of Public Information informed of additional information provided by respondents.

11. Despite the response rate, the results of the second survey also provide an indication of interest in the proposed radio pilot project: 89 radio stations were interested in participation. Seventy-one expressed unconditional interest, while 18 showed conditional interest and requested samples of the programming or some form of technical/financial assistance in order to proceed further. Overall, these results suggest that there is sufficient interest in the project to take it further, since 80 per cent of the respondents indicated an unconditional interest in participation.

12. The surveys provide a good foundation to build on to ensure that the development of the pilot project is based on an understanding of the needs of individual radio stations in different regions. Additional steps are being taken to contact those major national broadcasters that are current partners of United Nations Radio but have not responded to the second survey. The aim is to develop an enhanced broadcasting relationship with those key broadcasters through the launch of the pilot project.

13. United Nations Radio will also continue a system of regular feedback and monitoring of radio stations' needs and preferences in order accurately to measure progress and response to the pilot project.

A. Airtime for the pilot project

14. The initial results of the second survey revealed that the availability of airtime for the pilot project differs markedly by region. Overall readiness is higher in developing countries and among stations without sufficient resources to permit in-depth or daily coverage of the activities of the United Nations, suggesting that due consideration should be given to development of the project in progressive stages. Further steps should be taken to encourage additional

national broadcasting organizations to support the pilot project by providing airtime or satellite distribution, which would help overcome the difficult situation of servicing a large number of small radio stations with fragmented audiences. In Africa south of the Sahara, with the highest response rate to the second survey, 27 stations (16 anglophone, 11 francophone), including many national networks, expressed interest in the pilot project.

15. There has also been a degree of interest among small private stations in Central/South America, a number of stations in Europe, some stations in the Russian Federation and the Commonwealth of Independent States and among several international broadcasters. In Europe, for example, Radio France Internationale, a major global broadcaster, which did not respond to the survey, has in a separate initiative expressed to the Department of Public Information its readiness to discuss making airtime available for the project on its global satellite distribution network.

16. Interest in the pilot project among broadcasters in the Middle East/North Africa, the Indian subcontinent, East and South-East Asia and the Far East, Australasia, the United States and Canada, was much lower. The consultant suggested that more direct and personal contact on the ground might be required to stimulate interest in the project in those areas.

17. It was also suggested that since major broadcasters, particularly those from the United States and Canada, have correspondents stationed at the United Nations or already have good access to sources of information on the United Nations, the pilot project holds less interest for them.

18. In view of the results of the two questionnaire surveys, the Department of Public Information is considering ways and means of allocating resources in the most effective manner to ensure global dissemination of daily radio news from the United Nations to interested national and regional audiences through the pilot project. This means that United Nations Radio should continue to focus both on key markets, where there are strong national broadcasters with wide audience reach, and on underserved regions, where local or national news sources are in short supply.

19. On 6 October 1999, the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information wrote to the permanent representatives of all Member States,

summarizing relevant provisions of the recommendations regarding the development of an international radio broadcasting capacity for the United Nations, adopted by the Committee on Information at its twenty-first session (May 1999). In his letter, he outlined the resources required and requested the views of Member States and their relevant institutions as to their readiness to make contributions towards the implementation of the project, in the form of airtime on broadcasting facilities or cash contributions to a trust fund.

20. The letter also sought the support of Member States for the implementation of the pilot project on the development of an international radio broadcasting capacity. It requested their assistance in approaching organizations involved in the broadcasting industry to make contributions, in cash or in kind, towards the implementation of the pilot project. The letter was accompanied by a questionnaire exploring the readiness of national broadcasting networks and satellite distribution operators to make airtime available for the broadcast of a daily United Nations radio programme package.

21. The Department of Public Information received responses from a limited number of Member States, none of which offered any financial contribution or commitment. The majority of responses confirmed readiness to participate in the project by offering airtime for the daily pilot project. They were supplemented by the results of the two questionnaire surveys that are reviewed in section II above. At the time of preparation of this report, a total of 114 radio stations and networks, including 11 international broadcasting organizations in 58 countries from all regions of the world, had expressed interest in participating in the pilot radio project by making a daily segment of airtime on their transmission facilities available for United Nations radio broadcasts. In view of the lack of any specific commitment to a financial contribution, it has been deemed necessary that the Department redeploy the amount of US\$ 1,760,300 from its approved programme budget for the 2000-2001 biennium for implementation of the pilot project. However, the Department will continue its efforts to seek extrabudgetary support for the project, since any extrabudgetary resources secured for the purpose would minimize the need for redeployment.

B. Different markets, different needs

22. In his report to the Committee on Information (A/AC.198/1999/5), the Secretary-General also recognized that programme design and the frequency of delivery may vary from region to region. The survey results support this view and need to be reflected in the development, production and delivery of the pilot package to different target regions. The implementation of the pilot project will proceed in accordance with the needs and interests of broadcasting stations in the Member States concerned, ensuring a demand-driven approach to the process of planning and developing the pilot project, in a way that would best utilize the available resources.

C. Distribution

23. The preferred method of distribution for the radio stations surveyed varied by region and according to the state of technological development in the receiving country. Satellite delivery was preferred overall, although both digital telephone lines (ISDN) and electronic file transfer (FTP) transmissions via Internet were requested by a significant minority of stations. This suggests that, at this stage, all three methods of dissemination need to be universally available. This conclusion is in line with the aim of United Nations Radio to expand multimedia dissemination via satellite, file transfer on the Internet, and, where possible, through audio streaming and downloadable audio files posted on the United Nations web site, to reach a broad mix of shortwave, AM and FM broadcasters around the world. This, however, is subject to many variables and to the significant disparities in the availability of Internet services in different regions of the world.

II. Programme review

24. In his report to the Committee on Information, the Secretary-General indicated that, in planning the staff and technical production resources for the pilot project, appropriate programme formats and modes of transmission would be adapted to ensure timely and more frequent delivery of programmes to meet the daily needs of the pilot project. The Secretary-General also stated that the achievement of this objective might include streamlining programme production and scaling down tape programme distribution.

25. Additional feedback from the questionnaire surveys and ongoing consultations with radio stations suggest that there is decreasing need for tape distribution in all regions and an increasing preference for more direct and reliable forms of distribution, such as satellite, ISDN and the Internet.

26. With this in mind, in January and February 2000, the Department of Public Information conducted a programme review, in order to address the major issues involved in developing the capacity of United Nations Radio to manage more effectively the production and distribution of the proposed daily pilot project, in line with the ongoing modernization of the Radio Service, which should result in better targeting and more frequent and timelier delivery of programmes. As part of the programme review, the following issues were all examined: streamlining and reorientation of current programming and distribution, development of the daily pilot package, development of news sources and content, training, logistics, promotion, monitoring and feedback.

27. The Department is planning to survey those broadcasters that currently receive United Nations programming on tape, in order to establish their preferred method of distribution. Where possible and where there are viable alternatives, tape distribution and its programme format will be curtailed or phased out.

28. Some weekly magazine programmes also need to be consolidated and reformulated and their resources realigned to allow for the production of new programme formats and to support the production of daily programming for the pilot project. Final identification of changes in programming, format and mode of distribution is dependent on the specific needs and requirements of radio stations in each region.

29. United Nations Radio will need to undergo a general repositioning exercise in order to mobilize resources to meet the daily production and distribution schedule of the pilot project in the six official languages. In that context, regional programme services would be further strengthened by providing, from within the approved level of resources available to the Department of Public Information, additional resources for their multilingual production and broadcasting capacity to ensure the consistent and effective delivery of the daily programme package in the six official languages. In order to streamline tape

programme production, optimize the use of existing resources and create a cost-effective structure for the implementation of the pilot project, the Department is initiating a survey of radio stations that receive tape programmes by mail or pouch in order to ascertain their usefulness and the possibility of replacing some of those programmes with the more timely delivery of a daily package of news, features, interviews, summaries of meetings and field reports. The structure of the Radio Service would also be strengthened by creating for the pilot project a central news-gathering unit, a programme research and planning unit and the position of a news editor, which would be accommodated within the approved level of resources available to the Department. They would be responsible for forward planning and daily news gathering so that information is pooled as a central resource for use by all languages and units. It is also envisaged that the implementation of the pilot project would be accompanied by transitional arrangements, whereby part of the tape programme production and distribution would be maintained and improved.

30. In cooperation with a major broadcasting organization, the Department of Public Information has organized, in preparation for the pilot project, a training programme to be held in April 2000 to refresh or upgrade staff producers' skills. Internal training workshops in a number of areas, including courses in the use of new technology, have been identified to supplement that training.

31. In an effort to ensure effective outreach, a plan would be developed to provide adequate promotion, monitoring and feedback on the effectiveness of the pilot project and to strengthen relationships with partner-broadcasters.

32. As part of the review, an audit of current programme production capacity and human resource levels has been completed. The audit indicates that the pilot project production of a daily package of 15-minute programmes in English, French and Spanish would be possible through adjustments, without substantial additional resources. Accordingly, the resources in certain official languages, including Arabic, Chinese and Russian, will need to be enhanced. This will be predicated on a minimum standard resource requirement of four full-time producers per language, a backup producer, a production assistant and a research assistant, in addition to the central services provided by the planned news and research

units. The pool of staff resources in English and French is deemed adequate for meeting the production requirements of the daily programme package. The additional requirements for other languages are built into the supplementary resources that have been approved in paragraphs 155 and 156 of General Assembly resolution 54/249.

33. In some units and regions, an effective small-scale daily production and distribution system for United Nations Radio programmes already exists. The Department is aware that in developing this new initiative, current successes must be built upon and not compromised by the new project.

III. Modernization

34. Modernization is under way on several fronts. The introduction of a network system of digital audio workstations a few years ago has revolutionized United Nations Radio production. Initially, the network was confined to the United Nations studio production areas, but it has recently been expanded to include the editorial offices of United Nations Radio. It is the intention of the Department to make further progress by integrating the existing digital production system with a digital delivery mechanism.

35. The long-term plan is to record live audio material from the conference rooms directly onto a central audio server which will interface with the United Nations digital audio workstation network and a digital archival storage. This will be linked to an automated delivery system that will enable staggered access to audio material for different time zones around the world. For faster delivery of news programming to broadcasting stations, the central audio server will also enable United Nations Radio producers to edit, at their own desktops, the audio distributed via the Intranet and Internet.

36. As the United Nations upgrades equipment and migrates to digital technology, the Radio Service will be better positioned to meet the distribution needs of radio stations that are ready to participate in the pilot project. Two immediate projects illustrate the coordination of such actions: the modernization of one of the radio studios and the upgrading of the international broadcasting centre.

IV. Conclusions

37. The development and implementation of the pilot project is one of the key components in the Department's overall drive to more effectively disseminate United Nations news directly to the media worldwide. It is also central to the ongoing modernization plans of United Nations Radio. The aim of the project is to enable United Nations Radio to increase the production and distribution of timely, regular news packages, targeted at different regions and meeting the needs of a wider range of audiences in disparate time zones.

38. The regional variations and preferences of radio stations in terms of their readiness to make airtime available for the pilot project were indicated in the two questionnaire surveys. The results highlight the need for United Nations Radio to pursue the most effective approach to the implementation of the pilot project, consistent with the level of interest and the availability of regular airtime.

39. In regions where there was a low response from radio stations to the survey questionnaire, the Department of Public Information will take additional steps to further survey the readiness of stations which may not be sufficiently aware of the project. This would include particular focus on current partners of United Nations Radio and on broadcasters with access to large national and international networks.

40. The questionnaire surveys and programme review have highlighted the need to streamline current programming, which would free up some staff resources that would be earmarked for the purpose of the implementation of the pilot project, while maintaining some elements of the tape programme production during the transitional period from weekly tape programme production and distribution to daily on-air broadcasting. The training service of a reputable international broadcasting organization concluded a two-week training workshop in April for all producers of the Radio Service, in preparation for the launch of the pilot project. At the same time, the positive responses received from broadcasting organizations in different regions have been tallied and divided into regional categories. The Department of Public Information will start contacting those organizations in

order to agree on the preferred modes of transmission from New York to the target region and the broadcast schedule for the pilot project.